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Affective Suffrage: Social Media, Street Protests, and Theatre as Alternative Spaces for Political Self-Representation in the 2012 Mexican Presidential Elections

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Abstract

This article examines alternative forums for democratic self-representation as a response to state corruption, especially the social movement #YoSoy132, which emerged online and on the streets during Mexico's 2012 electoral campaigns, demanding media impartiality and fair elections; and the theatrical work *Atlas Electores 2012*, Teatro Ojo's biweekly scenic documentary series. Examining these representational spaces (the street protest, social media, and the stage) allows new insights into the performance of political representation. While a vote may be bought, discounted, or prevented, Mexican citizens vote symbolically with their bodies, occupying both physical and digital spaces. The heterotopias examined here are examples of meaning-making sites, where social actors contest state power. These spaces are affectively charged because, while the street and the stage are real locations, they also serve as representational spaces for enacting political desire. This article argues that the heterotopias of the stage, the street, and social media function as more productive sites for political self-representation during and just after the 2012 Mexican presidential elections than the voting booth's anonymity, by fostering community and transparency in the face of a corrupt electoral system.

Keywords

elections, corruption, media, #YoSoy132, Mexico, theatre, democracy, social media

Just before Mexico's 2012 presidential election, which resulted in the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)'s return to power after a twelve-year hiatus, tens of thousands of young people throughout the nation protested in the streets and online under the banner of a social movement called #YoSoy132 (#IAm132), demanding media impartiality and fair elections. Simultaneously, Mexico City theatre company Teatro Ojo staged a biweekly documentary series entitled *Atlas Electores 2012* (Electors Atlas). In the theatre, voters staged their own personal democratic process throughout the weeks before the elections, casting their symbolic votes publicly in an illuminated voting booth during the final performance. Examining these representational spaces (the street protest, social media, and the stage) uncovers new insights into twenty-first-century performances of political will. This article examines the spaces of the stage, the street, and social media

as affectively charged heterotopias.

While a vote may be bought, discounted, or prevented, Mexican citizens vote symbolically with their bodies, occupying both physical and digital spaces. The heterotopias, spaces that function outside of the space of ordinary life or that contain various layers of meaning, examined here are examples of meaning-making sites, where social actors contest state power. These spaces are affectively charged because, while the street and the stage are real locations, they also serve as representational spaces for enacting political desire. The heterotopias of the stage, the street, and social media function as more productive sites for political self-representation during and just after the 2012 Mexican presidential elections than the voting booth's anonymity, by fostering community and transparency in the face of a corrupt electoral system. I argue that, by fostering community and transparency in the face of a corrupt electoral system, these heterotopias serve as more productive sites for political self-representation than the anonymity of the voting booth.

Other Spaces

Rossana Reguillo provides an evocative description of Mexico in 2012, the setting of the events studied here:

It is Mexico, and the XXI century begins with the slight promise of a possible democracy. For the first time in 70 years, the governing Party, the PRI (Revolutionary Institutional Party), loses [sic] the elections against the party of the eternal opposition, the PAN (National Action Party), which from its much-extended coexistence with its adversary, ends up being a faithful copy of its historical nemesis. The ensuing years would show that everything changed without anything actually changing—the deterioration of the living conditions of the majority of Mexicans continues; brutal violence erupts on the national scene, ingovernability [sic] increases; media monopolies assert their power; and two Mexicans enter the exclusive list of Forbes millionaires: Carlos Slim, the Telmex telephone company tycoon and, El Chapo Guzmán, the phantom leader of the Pacific Cartel. That is Mexico. New elections are coming and after 12 years outside the Presidency, the PRI aims to return to power. The PAN has been worn down by bad administration and internal disputes, as Felipe Calderón has become the representation of failure and violence. The left is atomized, divided, and bereft of visible new leaders. It is 2012. (n.pag.)

This scene is, obviously ripe for change. While corruption is easily and stereotypically associated with Mexican elections, the nation's political system is ideologically rooted in the ideal of a fair, democratic society. The revolutionary slogan *sufragio efectivo, no reelección* (effective suffrage, no re-election) was coined by Francisco I. Madero, a candidate for the Mexican presidency in 1910, running against six-term incumbent Porfirio Díaz. Díaz himself had run on the slogan *No Reelección* (No Re-election) in 1871, but found the presidency quite comfortable and stayed put when his first term ended. Madero formed an opposition party called the *Partido Nacional Antirreeleccionista* (National Anti-Reelectionist Party), was jailed and then exiled to the US, where he launched the plan for the 1910 Mexican Revolution. Effective suffrage, in the context of Mexican political history, means that a democratic vote can effect change. The events discussed here took place about one century after the Mexican Revolution. That revolution's legacy plays out not only in modern-day elections, but also as the people take their right to democratic representation into their own hands, into the streets, and onto the stage.

In this paper, I will refer to democracy to indicate the most basic requirement of democracy: congruence between voter interests and their elected representatives' decisions; i.e., that citizen interests are considered in legislative processes. I am not, however, making an argument about the meaning of or normative ends of democracy. Rather, I am using the concept of democratic self-representation, broadly understood, to mean that a citizen's vote counts for something. I find Robert Dahl's concept of polyarchy, in which seven "procedural minimal" conditions must be present, to be a useful gloss of this concept. Condition two stipulates that "Elected officials are chosen in frequently and fairly conducted elections in which coercion is comparatively uncommon." Number six requires that "Citizens have a right to seek out alternative sources of information. Moreover, alternative sources of information exist and are protected by law" (Dahl 11). These two relate to the performances of democratic self-representation I will be analyzing.

Additionally, in his study of citizen conceptions of democracy and political dissatisfaction in Mexico from 1997-2008, David Crow argues that the way citizens conceive of democracy is tied to their satisfaction with it. He writes that substantive democrats define "democracy as economic growth tied to [. . .] a more equitable distribution of its benefits," pointing out that "Mexican democracy has failed to deliver" such effects (43). Substantive democrats are, according to Crow, the most disenchanted, while "[t]hose who see democracy as a collection of rights are somewhat more satisfied, and those who emphasize elections, still more" (43). This might be used to discount my argument that citizens are taking to venues other than the ballot box for self-representation, as electoral democrats are the most satisfied; however Crow also points out that though economic performance is a strong

factor in determining satisfaction, individual liberties have also fared poorly in Mexico in the 21st century: “[. . .] rampant human rights abuses (especially at the subnational level), weak rule of law, continuing corruption, impunity of the powerful, and waning freedom of the press counteracted gains on other fronts” (45). Crow also admits that the concepts of substantive democracy, electoralism, and liberalism overlap.

The promise of an effective vote continues to seduce the Mexican citizenry as a means to achieve individual liberties and economic rights, but the means for executing political self-representation have been questioned. While an actual vote might be bought, discounted, or prevented, Mexican citizens have found alternatives by symbolically voting with their bodies in both physical and digital spaces. In his study of digitally connected 21st-century social movements, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*, Manuel Castells argues, ‘Power is exercised by means of coercion [. . .] and/or by the construction of meaning in people’s minds’. He states that coercion and intimidation are limited in their effectiveness, asserting that ‘the fundamental power struggle is the battle for the construction of meaning in the minds of the people’ (5). The spaces examined here are exemplary meaning-making sites, heterotopias where social actors contest state power and construct their own versions of democratic representation.

In the essay "Of Other Spaces," Foucault defines heterotopias as "countersites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (24). Foucault provides examples like the mirror, because it juxtaposes reality and unreality; the rest home, a space cloistered from society; and the cemetery, a city within a city. The idea of heterotopia is a useful lens for examining the various manifestations of Mexican democracy. These sites are affectively charged because, while the street and the stage are real locations, they also serve as representational spaces for enacting political desire.

I engage directly with Paulina Aroch-Fugellie, who posits that #YoSoy132 protesters manage to extend the classic sense of heterotopia (they literally take over a cinema for one of their demonstrations, one of the sites Foucault mentions as exemplary of heterotopia) and show that the space around it, as well, is fictional. She sees the protesters’ actions as a form of leveraging mass media’s discourse to their own ends in an attempt to “[stand] outside the neoliberal world” (365). She argues that “Their action not only reverses the usual assignation of real versus virtual space to the political and the cinematographic respectively, but also denotes the opposition between material and ideological realms as being itself idealist” (362). In the examples I look at here, I see the heterotopias serving as spaces for the self-representation denied by the democratic process. This does not make

them any more real—their political effectiveness is not clearly related to changes in leadership. Rather, they are effective because of their affective function. In these spaces, bodily encounters create a ‘primacy of the affective’ (Massumi 85), defined by Brian Massumi as intensity marked by a gap between content and effect. While Massumi’s analysis discusses reactions to a short film, the characterization also applies to the spaces examined here. The content of the heterotopia—manifest desire in the shared space of the street and the stage—is separated from its effect—the lack of influence over electoral politics.

In an essay on dissidence in Mexico, Rossana Reguillo traces the term “dissidence” to its origins of “not residing,” and traces dissidence in Mexico to the 1994 Zapatista uprising which “calls for not remaining within the same dominant model and that, much to the contrary, marks its distance and its non-desire to inscribe itself within the system.” She argues that “In the face of the discursive order of modern democracy and its devices, supported on the notion of consensus, equilibrium, stability, and of agreements by any means necessary, dissidence irrupts to destabilize the politics of consensus” (n.pag.) This destabilizing dissidence opens up other spaces for participation and change. Whereas suffrage is a symbolic act, delegating desire to a mark on a ballot, the bodily occupation of heterotopias like the street and the theatre, as well as the virtual occupation of social media, allow the effective representation of political desire, even as this representation is external to political power. The spaces of the street, the social network, and the stage “represent”, “contest”, and “invert” the space of the ballot booth. As affectively charged spaces, they reveal the limitations of that lauded symbol of modern democracy’s anonymity and isolation. Massumi proposes approaching an affectively charged image as an event rather than a structure, because “structure is the place where nothing ever happens, that explanatory heaven in which all eventual permutations are prefigured in a self-consistent set of invariant generative rules” (87), whereas the event “is the collapse of structured distinction into intensity, of rules into paradox” (87). The events of protest and representation occurring in the street, on social media, and on stage create meaning, whereas the electoral system’s structure repeats itself, resulting in the same outcome no matter what the input.

Additionally, the theatre functions as a heterotopia in which the real political sphere is revealed as its constituting representational acts. In *Theatre’s Heterotopias: Performance and the Cultural Politics of Space*, Joanne Tompkins traces the concept of heterotopia’s genealogy and proposes its use in theatre studies to connect the theatre with cultural politics. Tompkins claims that “theatre’s continual presentation of ‘possible worlds’ in performance can intensify the art form’s relationship with the actual world beyond a venue” (16). The theatrical series *Atlas Electores 2012*, in which voters, over the

course of several weeks, enacted their political will on the stage, exemplifies this concept. As in Tompkins's scheme, the theatre's physical space overlaps with and is invaded by the political actions taking place in the streets outside. The staging of the democratic vote in a country afflicted with electoral corruption reveals the theatrics inherent in the presidential campaigns and exercise of executive power.

The Campaigns

Though Mexico's twentieth century saw a successful popular revolution, the nation's politics are marred by both perceived and real corruption, closely connected to the PRI's dominance. Political scientist Stephen D. Morris succinctly provides a litany of examples: "from the payment of the *mordida* ([. . .] bite' [. . .]) to police or bureaucrats, or purchase of an *amparo* (a type of injunction) from judges, to the pocketing of millions by high-ranking government officials" (623). The system referred to here was embodied by the PRI. The party has dominated Mexican politics since the Revolution and its official founding in 1929. Nobel Prize-winning Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa called the PRI's reign the "perfect dictatorship", ruling Mexico for seventy-one years in the twentieth century. As Carlos Montemayor and Miguel Tinker Salas explain, the PRI functions less as a political party than as a "mechanism for the distribution of political and administrative power at all levels" (90). After losing the presidency to the conservative National Action Party (PAN) in 2000, the PRI returned to federal rule in 2012 with its young candidate, Enrique Peña Nieto. The PRI's return to power, however, was not without controversy. Not only was media giant Televisa heavily biased toward Peña Nieto, but charges of vote buying and other electoral irregularities also marred Peña Nieto's candidacy as well as perceptions of Mexican democracy. The alternative sites of political self-expression analyzed here—social media, street, and stage—emerge within this context. This project examines the way Mexican students and artists reject the dubious representation offered by the voting booth, instead representing themselves on the streets and the stage. I argue that these spaces have become alternative forums for democratic representation in the face of a broken electoral system.

These alternative forums signify a shift in the power structure. Rather than a centralized political narrative, characteristic of the old PRI, alternative narratives crop up at every turn. The technological advances of the early twenty-first century allow any interested citizen to record and disseminate their political views. Even if the PRI still controls the ballot box, the citizenry has found the cracks in the façade and taken full advantage of them. To demonstrate the disconnect between effective political power and demonstrations of popular political desire, I will discuss the genesis of

the #YoSoy132 movement, analyzing its catalyzing YouTube video, the street protests known as *fiestas por la luz de la verdad* (festivals for the light of truth), and the theatrical production *Atlas Electores 2012*. Each exemplifies a heterotopic alternative space for political self-representation in 2012.

In that year's presidential elections, the PRI challenged the incumbent PAN with a young, telegenic candidate who promised a new party. As the candidate, Peña Nieto, proclaimed in a campaign speech at the Estadio Azteca a week before the elections, "We are part of the PRI that is to come". Many were wary of the PRI's return, however, and its candidate, husband to the popular soap opera actress, Angélica Rivera, known as "*La Gaviota*" ("The Seagull") after her character in the series *Destilando amor* (*Distilling Love*). The couple's connection to Mexican television giant Televisa, the producer of several of Rivera's soap operas, goes beyond her salary' during Peña Nieto's presidential candidacy WikiLeaks would reveal the widely accepted rumor that the candidate had illegally paid Televisa for favorable news coverage and airtime (Williard). In 2012 the good-looking candidate represented, for many, a return to the old, *priista* politics. In this context Peña Nieto visited the private, Jesuit *Universidad Iberoamericana* (UIA) in Mexico City's Santa Fe neighborhood on May 11, 2012. While the candidate was accustomed to controlled environments, at the Ibero, as the university is known, he was greeted by students wearing masks representing the last PRI president, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, and holding signs alluding to Peña Nieto's violent response as governor to protesters in Atenco.¹ After defending his actions as governor, the candidate was practically chased out of the auditorium amidst booing, insults, and even a thrown shoe (Estrello and Modonesi 220-221). The party responded by claiming that the troublemakers were not actually students but rather *porros* (paid agitators) on the opposition's payroll.

Digital Space

In response to accusations that they were merely paid agitators, the students took to YouTube, posting a video entitled *131 Ibero Students Respond*, in which 131 students display their university ID cards and confirm their status as students, thereby disproving the hypothesis that they were the opposition's infiltrators. The video has a DIY aesthetic, with sequential images of individual students using their built-in webcams in their bedrooms or, less commonly, groups fitting into the shot together. The compartmentalization of each student in their own quarters is due to the nature of digital activism: the swiftness of the students' response was only possible because students could shoot a three-second video on their own time and send it to a central compiler who would upload the finished product to YouTube. In contrast to a traditional street protest, in which the sheer mass of

bodies gathered in one place gives the manifestation its force, here the separation of bodies is overcome by digital technologies. In the video, each student identifies themselves by name and university ID number and repeats that they are not *acarreados* (bussed-in voters) or *porros*. The ideal of transparency is obvious; the students expose themselves, however, to retribution by identifying themselves so openly.² The video quickly went viral, provoking expressions of solidarity on social media marked by the hashtag #YoSoy132, with each supporter symbolically joining the lineup as the 132nd citizen willing to put a face to a name and speak out.

This transparency and literal self-representation, an apparent value of social media, contrasts to the anonymity of the ballot booth, a tenet of democracy. While, as Felix Stalder warns, the advent of technologies like YouTube can be seen as the catalyst for political activism and changes in material reality, here I consider “how social actors are able to appropriate new technologies to advance their existing, material agendas” (Stalder 243). In Mexico in 2012, the democratic fruit was ripe for the picking. The PRI’s hold on government at all levels ended with the last millennium, revealing the monolith’s vulnerability. Indeed, while Peña Nieto’s shame at the UIA was broadcast over Twitter, and the student response uploaded to YouTube, the event itself was sparked by the in-person conflict at the university. In the case of *131 Ibero students respond*, digital space becomes an alternative forum for self-representation in the case of failed political representation. Reguillo writes that “#YoSoy132 was not a call to insurgency in a traditional political sense, it was a dissident invitation to think and feel in another way, an appeal to think and feel “*as if* one were already free”, *as if* everything had started to change simply because change was imagined” (n.pag.). Peña Nieto’s visit came before the elections, as part of his campaign. Even so the student protesters were stripped of their political identities by PRI apologists who called them *acarreados* and *porros*, undermining their credibility and denying them the opportunity to represent themselves. The video response represents the retaking of the political self—Reguillo’s *thinking and feeling as if*. YouTube is the heterotopic space of political self-representation in the face of unfair party politics. From the safety and privacy of their bedrooms, the students are digitally transposed onto the raucous space of public debate, where their uniquely intimate voices were heard. Social media can be considered a heterotopia: it functions as a non-space, an organizational network that can result in real manifestations of political expression but that per se doesn’t allow for physical proximity of bodies. In this video, students manage to create a simultaneously collective and individual, public and private space online. It contests the space of the traditional debate forum—revealing its lack of transparency, scripted nature, and the financial interests behind it—by creating a virtual space that embodies transparency and spontaneity.

In Mexico, social organization on the Internet has a relatively long history, with its genesis in the pioneering movement of the Zapatistas, as Guiomar Rovira Sancho reminds us in her efficient recounting of the twenty-first century up to the emergence of #YoSoy132. The activities of #YoSoy132 have been meticulously documented in various anthropological and sociological studies, including those by Carmen Alba Díaz, who compiles participant testimonies; Jorge Alonso, who argues that #YoSoy132 revealed the powerful interests that actually control Mexican elections; Luz Estrello and Massimo Modonesi, who provide a daily log of the genesis of the movement, reading it as a watershed moment for youth participation in Mexican politics; as well as by the periodicals *La Jornada* and *Proceso*. In a nutshell, the movement took to the streets on May 18, 2012, demanding the end to the manipulation of information for electoral purposes (Estrello and Modonesi 222). On May 23 an even larger outpouring of support took the form of a march of almost fifteen thousand students down Mexico City's *Paseo de la Reforma*, a major traffic artery, and simultaneous demonstrations in fourteen other Mexican states (Estrello and Modonesi 224). The demands were for the democratization of the mass media and an end to lies. These and subsequent marches were mostly organized on social media. While the idea of effective suffrage has suffered in Mexico, the ideal of democratic self-representation is alive and well. The swift and powerful emergence of the movement indicates that equating the right to vote with democratic representation is a flawed equivalency; indeed, self-representation demands and creates alternative spaces in the face of state corruption. As Raúl Diego Rivera Hernández points out, #YoSoy132 had important triumphs, including the decisions on the parts of Televisa and TV Azteca to broadcast the second presidential debate on national television. Additionally, in the face of the IFE's rejection of their demands for a third debate, they organized their own with all candidates but Peña Nieto, who rejected their invitation, and broadcast it on YouTube (Rivera Hernández "Activismo En Línea Y Activismo En Las Calles: Claves Políticas Para Pensar Al #Yosoy132" 16). Additionally, the reach of the movement was global; likened to the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and the Indignad@s movement, #YoSoy132 found support from both Mexicans around the country and the world and international backers such as the Rolling Stones and Occupy Wall Street.

The Street

On June 13, 2012, students demonstrated outside of Televisa's facilities in Chapultepec, a centric zone of Mexico City. Televisa has been accused of manipulating political coverage through a systematic campaign of name and facial recognition--prominently featuring Peña Nieto, then-

governor of the State of Mexico, in the stands at soccer matches, and his wife on the network's popular soap operas—long before the campaigns officially began. As early as 2009 the US Embassy in Mexico noted the widespread belief that “Televisa backs the governor [Peña Nieto] and provides him with an extraordinary amount of airtime and other kinds of coverage” in exchange for fees (Williard n.pag.)³. The bias was also visible during the official campaign season, as John M. Ackerman demonstrates. While the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) has guidelines concerning media coverage of electoral campaigns, the application of these guidelines is reduced to merely counting the number of mentions and recording time allotted to each candidate, not a real analysis. Even with this superficial monitoring, Peña Nieto received significantly more time than his competitors (Ackerman 55). This privileging of a candidate by Televisa includes whitewashing his disastrous mishandling of the Atenco protest. #YoSoy132, protesting biased media coverage of the elections, projected videos onto the exterior walls of Televisa's buildings, including “What is Being Manipulated Behind these Walls?”, which shows some of the most violent deeds of the past forty years in Mexico and how the channel “manipulated” their portrayal (Zapata). The building itself, the physical space occupied by the media

giant, is temporarily and noninvasively awash with images of Peña Nieto's visit to the Ibero (see fig.1).

While Televisa occupies itself with broadcasting *telenovelas* and soccer matches, inserting its candidate into the consciousness of the nation, the student protesters occupy Televisa, broadcasting the dark side of the candidate's political past, such as testimonies of the victims of human rights abuses in Atenco. The imperfections of the projection, such as the lines on the building that disrupt the smooth, soothing screen one might see at a drive-in movie, recalls the DIY aesthetic of the original YouTube video *131 Ibero Students Respond*, contrasting with Televisa's slick productions. The vegetation that invades the picture at the base of the building, meanwhile, lends a sense of living reality to the scene in contrast to the over-the-top artificiality of the network's soap operas, as well as rooting the event in place.

The place is highly symbolic. Televisa held a 70 percent market share in the Mexican open television market at the time of the protests ("Competition Issues in Television and Broadcasting" 219). Projecting onto the side of Televisa's production facilities in Chapultepec, which focus



Figure 1 Fiesta por la luz de la verdad, June 13, 2012 Geraldine Ramos used under a CC BY 4.0

license <http://www.somoselmedio.org/2012/06/14/1495>

specifically on news and sports, transformed both the private space within and the public space outside into a heterotopia. The newsroom is then, as Foucault puts it, represented, contested, and inverted. While Televisa continued reporting its version of election news and ever-present football results on the inside, the building's outer shell was transposed with alternative versions of events. The protesters remain true to the journalistic mission of reporting the news, as they represent their own version of reality while simultaneously contesting Televisa's version. The media space is then inverted, inside out, outside in. The ugly truth of the media's biased reporting is exposed, while suppressed testimonies are injected into Televisa's narrative by force of light and sound. What the projectionist's protest does, then, is recast Televisa in the light of truth; indeed, the demonstrations were called *Fiestas por la luz de la verdad* (Festivals of the Light of Truth). By literally covering the walls with the light and sound of the testimony of victims of the Atenco suppression, the protesters insist on another version of the truth and democratization of the media.

In her analysis of the artistic arm of #YoSoy132, *Artistas Aliados* (Allied Artists), Paulina Aroch-Fugellie examines the effects of new technologies on contested power in Mexico. She describes Televisa's counterattacks on the demonstrations, which included cutting out power and drowning out projections with spotlights (Aroch-Fugellie 360). The movement did not depend entirely on technology, however. In addition to the contrasting visual effects, the demonstration's insistence on bodily presence challenged Televisa's mass media format, aided by social media. Whereas televised programs are generally consumed in the privacy of home, the films projected on Televisa's walls were ephemeral acts requiring simultaneous presence. Social media provided the means for this presence, but the bodies in the street gave the *fiestas* their true power. Rather than compartmentalize viewers into separate viewing spaces, #YoSoy132's projection was experienced en masse; the viewing public was the multitude, and its bodily presence at the media conglomerate's headquarters challenged the one-way street of television as usual. The viewer was present, responding with bodily weight and voice to the content of the program. Song, shouts, and movement all contributed to the experience of viewing, transforming it into an active rather than passive exercise. Through their attendance, the protesters make manifest their own demands without waiting for Televisa's response. They democratize the media by bringing the demos to the media's physical space.⁴ The space of protest is one of transformation; if only temporarily, what the media had suppressed became literally external, brought to light; the media giant's manipulations were revealed without violence. The protesters modelled the behavior they demanded from Televisa through non-violence and transparency.

About a month before the election, some of the original students from the YouTube video

131 Ibero Students Respond returned to the theme of self-identification and encouraged supporters to sign up to be official electoral observers. On July 5, 2012, CNN reported that twenty-nine per cent more electoral observers participated in 2012 than in the previous presidential elections, an increase of 7,484 more participants, CNN later reported on June 21, 2012, that more than half of the electoral observer applications from citizens came from members of #YoSoy132. The message of self-representation, which begins with identifying oneself in the sphere of social media, seems to have inspired cautious optimism and action within the official electoral realm.

On July 1, Election Day, the newly minted electoral observers took photographs of irregularities at polling stations throughout the country, posting them to social networks (Estrello and Modonesi 231-232). On August 2, #YoSoy132 leadership presented a report on electoral crimes to the IFE stating that throughout Election Day the organization had received reports of irregularities such as vote-buying, ballot theft, violence, counting anomalies, threats, and assaults on election observers (#YoSoy132). The official complaints were to no avail, however, as Peña Nieto easily took the presidency. As Jorge Alonso puts it, “the validation, free of criticism, of a process plagued with irregularities finally convinced #YoSoy132 that the electoral via was closed to the *pueblo* by the powers that be and complicit electoral authorities”⁵ (22). Peña Nieto’s victory was labelled an imposition by the movement. The myth of self-representation in the ballot booth was debunked. The exuberance of #YoSoy132 might have died along with the movement’s hopes of defeating Enrique Peña Nieto. If the elections are not to be trusted, then what is the point of voting? The exuberance lives on, nevertheless, inhabiting other spaces. The need to be represented democratically finds new forums outside of the ballot booth. Scholars such as Rodrigo Gómez García and Emiliano Trereré argue, however, that while the goal of defeating the PRI was not achieved, the movement “was able to profoundly impact the electoral process in a very short space of time.” They also highlight that “it was able to impose discussion on media concentration and democratization within the institutions’ agendas and the public sphere” (497). Whether it be through political activism, on the grand stage of the street, or through theatre of the real, to which I turn now, the idea of effective representation in the public sphere is expanding to include unconventional spaces.

The Stage

Stuart A. Day, in *Staging Politics in Mexico*, reminds readers that “one does not have to attend a formal theatrical event to see politics performed” (13). As we have seen up to now, protesters performed their political will as part of #YoSoy132’s street and social media actions. While Mexican

theatre's history is much more complex than could possibly be accounted for in this brief space, it does have an established tradition of playing out political debates and portraying political history. The link between democratic and theatrical representation is well established, though theatre's role as a space for contesting political representation is a newer one. Day points out,

Though many plays questioned postrevolutionary governments, [. . .] during much of the seventy-one year rule of the [. . .] PRI [. . .], dramatists were many times in line with the revolutionary ideals championed by the ruling party. As faith in the PRI eroded over the years, however, the distance between the artistic community's vision and that of the government became more and more severe. ("Performing Mexico" 160)

By the time the PRI attempts to return to the presidency in 2012, this divide between the artistic community and the party is schismatic. Faith in the party and the federal electoral system is low, and rather than seeing the voting booth as a potential engine for political self-representation, artists and students engage in creative alternatives to official elections. Independent theatre companies (unlike commercial theatres, many of which are owned by media giants Televisa and TV Azteca) are especially active both onstage and in the street during this period.

While documentary theatre has a long history in Mexico--beginning with Vicente Leñero's 1968 *Pueblo rechazado* (*Rejected People*)--what Carol Martin calls "theatre of the real" has only been gaining traction in the twenty-first century. Indeed, contemporary companies like Teatro Ojo seek, in various ways, to stage "what has really happened" (Martin 5). Rooted in the tradition of documentary theatre, Teatro Ojo works with documentary evidence such as photographs, campaign materials, videos, and personal objects, to represent reality onstage. The semi-improvised nature of the performances, though, with their changing directions each week, tend to push the boundaries of documentary theatre. Rather than working from a contrived and repeatable script, their work attempts to document attitudes about democracy in Mexico by starting from a set of questions and creating a space in which they can be answered by real people in a performance setting.

In the months before Election Day the Mexico City experimental troupe organized a series of scenic forums entitled *Atlas Electores 2012*, in which registered voters volunteered to participate in weekly theatrical presentations highlighting their attitudes toward the candidates, the parties, and democracy in general. The participants were a self-selected group that answered a call for participants sent to the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) Theatre's email list. The objective was to document the real journey of each voter, capturing the formative moments and family structures that influence one's politics as well as recording the real-time grappling with the vote during

the campaigns.

The project plays with the idea of theatrical self-representation by focusing on the act of voting, with its double implication that one chooses their representative in the political sphere while also constructing a political version of herself, represented by a check on the ballot. Watching one of the presentations of *Atlas Electores 2012* is like entering a documentarian's laboratory. The scenic project's cast is made up of non-actors or amateurs who share their relationship to their vote onstage. They discuss the evolution of this act of self-representation throughout the political campaigns, week by week. By placing the constituents onstage, Teatro Ojo immediately calls the spectator's attention to the fact that voting is a performance, much like giving a campaign speech or swearing an oath of office. The series uses Brechtian distancing techniques such as having the lights up, directly addressing the audience, and projected text, to remind the spectator, as Brecht would have it, that the act of voting is not natural and that intervention and change is welcome. This performance theatricalizes voting, highlighting the constructed nature of the vote and voter. As the electors ponder and justify their vote in the biweekly presentations, they emphasize the distance between the voter and the seemingly natural act of voting.

The focus on process—the unrepeatability of the biweekly forums as well as their real-time cadence—also links back to the idea of the vote as a construction. The mere act of staging the formation of a vote calls attention to its status as a performance; it happens once, in an unrepeatability moment, but is also the result of a lifetime of political influences from family, the media, ideologies, and life experiences. *Atlas electores* calls attention to the dissonance between the singular moment in time at which the actual casting of a ballot takes place and the fluid and flexible progression of time, the series of experiences that makes a person who they are. The democratic ideal of political representation is boiled down to an instant, whereas the complexities of real life, real political will, can only be understood as part of a temporal continuum. The past—what has brought the voter to this point—and the future—the voters' hopes, dreams, and fears—are both wrapped up in and impossible to account for in the present of voting.

In the performances each voter not only shared their political beliefs and, in some cases, tried to convince others to agree with them, but was also working out how to perform that belief, constructing an argument and a political identity to support their July 1 vote. Election Day was the culmination of such a construction, but the focus on process, as well as the performances themselves, provided critical distance to the act of voting, revealing it as an act of self-representation, in various senses of the term. The fact that *Atlas Electores 2012* was not a one-time event, but rather a series of

unrepeated performances reminded viewers of the unseen depths of each individual vote. Once the twenty voters were chosen, teams of researchers from Teatro Ojo accompanied them in their everyday lives, interviewing the electors and their family members and acquaintances and collecting documentary evidence such as photographs. After the research phase came the rehearsal process, in which the voters came prepared to present answers, with audio-visual support, to questions that the company posed. For example, one module entitled “My first political memory” asked electors to remember their first encounter with the political sphere. From among the retold memories, Teatro Ojo made decisions about which memories to include in the performances and how they would be represented. The last step of the process of *Atlas Electores 2012* was the staging. One of the most interesting aspects was how indefinable the project turned out to be. Rather than a product, what was staged was a collection of raw comments, memories, and contradictions. The result is a liminal staging that feels more like a workshop for conceiving of ideas for a play than a play itself. This does not mean Teatro Ojo does not mediate the onstage subjects’ words. In fact, each forum had a different format, developed by the company, which emphasized the topics chosen for discussion in the episode.

Although *Atlas Electores 2012* does not have the traditional characteristics of a play, with a script and an element of repeatability, each forum was organized and rehearsed before being presented to audiences in the theatre of the University Museum of Contemporary Art on the UNAM campus. Each of the seven sessions had its own focus, set, and group of voters. While *Atlas Electores 2012* is not a traditional play, however, theatricality is not lost. The debates presented were not exactly spontaneous, unless an audience member intervened, which occurred on occasion. The shared memories were previously vetted. While each performance was a one-time event, the electors repeated what they had rehearsed beforehand. In this way, the primary source, or the voters’ memories, seems spontaneous. However, the memories are transmitted within a theatrical, organized framework. This marriage between the spontaneous and the rehearsed questions the possibilities of democratic and documentary representation. The parts of the play that seem improvised, like a debate between two electors or audience participation, give the project a sense of realness. At the same time, though, the knowledge that it is a theatrical staging requires the recognition of the constructed nature of both the theatrical presentation and the actual vote. Throughout the project’s trajectory, the voters showed themselves to be fallible. They might change party or even alter memories without announcing the change; sometimes they contradicted themselves when it came to facts about their lives. In the same way, the electoral campaigns advanced with the caprices of history and political events influenced the staging of *Atlas Electores 2012* as the elections drew nearer.

Of course, as the series developed, the candidates' actions affected the electors' plans for their vote. As the forums continued in real time, the organizers could not predict the impact that #YoSoy132 would have on the electoral landscape. The company scrambled to include the movement onstage. Teatro Ojo's director signed a public letter of support along with many other intellectuals and artists, commending the members of #YoSoy132 for their "refusal to keep silent" and the way they defended themselves "against the construction of a lie" (*Sin Embargo*). The lie, of course, was about the identity of the Ibero students who defended themselves through self-identification, representing themselves by name and ID number on video. By using documentary theatre or onstage self-representation as a metaphor for the act of voting, Teatro Ojo makes a clear comparison between theatrical representation and electoral self-representation, the promise of modern democracy.

The project, however, also showed frustrated self-representation in both cases. In the second session, the voters and audience were divided into two groups to discuss their relationship with their elected representatives. In the first moments, the experience turned out to be frustrating for both the electors and the audience. The voters competed for the floor, while the audience wondered what was going on in the other group, where laughter, or the ebb and flow of a debate, could be heard. The frustration was a consequence of lacking the necessary information to make an informed decision about which group to sit with, the lack of attention on the part of the audience, and the unfulfilled desire to participate, all frustrations that have their counterparts in the democratic process. The point of tension between the polished and the spontaneous allows Teatro Ojo's project to demonstrate the frustrations of democracy and frustrated democracy. By revealing the mechanisms of the documentary genre, and the mechanisms behind the political thought of each elector, the improvised and precarious nature of the democratic process is also revealed. Deep down, the theatrical project *Atlas Electores 2012* is an attempt to demonstrate the personal aspects of the public action of voting. By including intimate family histories, the vote is revealed to be a product not of rational decisions about political issues, but of a series of affective bonds and personal experiences that may support or contradict one's decision. At the same time, it casts the vote as artifice, a projection of what one would like to be. In *Atlas Electores 2012*, voting becomes a collective action of personal self-representation, though the rationality of a cast vote is called into question.

Conclusions

The examples examined here vary widely, from a spontaneous student protest movement

organized via social media to alternative theatrical performances. The fact that they take both place in Mexico's election year, along with their preoccupation with self-representation, makes them an interesting set of cases to inform our understanding of how democratic self-determination is conceived of in contemporary Mexico. The various social networks juxtapose all the spaces of their users into one virtual site, while allowing for an accumulation of time in that users' contributions can be submitted at various instances but appear altogether, simultaneously. This is what we observe in the *131 Ibero students respond* video; each contributor made their video individually and sent it in to be compiled. The street protest, which requires the simultaneous presence of multiple bodies, is backed by the disparate presence of online supporters. Similarly, the social network and the theatre are isolated but penetrable, with limited access, and also "have a function in relation to all the space that remains" (Foucault 27). I argue that both the theatre and the virtual and physical spaces of protest work to "create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory" (Foucault 27). Because these spaces are heterotopias—the digital space offering a virtual convergence of isolated bodies; the street as the ultimate public space; the theatre as a space in which representation and falseness are closely aligned—they allow for manifestations of desire that are impossible in the regimented structure of politics as usual. In particular, the real space of the ballot booth is revealed as illusory by the heterotopias discussed here. In the case of #YoSoy132, the insistence on self-identification via YouTube and in massive protests reveals the lack of correspondence between a cast vote and electoral results. Teatro Ojo's forums provide an alternative to the ballot booth, revealing the inconsistencies in a voter's own democratic narrative. Mexico, in 2012, was the site of a return: the return of mass student mobilizations; the return of the PRI; the return of the values of the Mexican Revolution, with its motto of "*¡Sufragio efectivo, no reelección!*" The 131 students appearing in the Ibero's YouTube video and the electors participating in Teatro Ojo's forums all sought, in 2012, an effective way to represent themselves. When the ballot

booth failed, citizens sought other spaces. While the ballot booth's effectiveness is called into question by these other spaces, the stage, the street, and social media offer themselves up as an alternative space in which self-representation may not be effective, but which achieves affective bonds between subjects through self-representation. To fully understand the democratic process in contemporary Mexico, we must look not only to the successes and failures, perceived and real, of the official electoral process, but also to the creative social and artistic expressions creating other spaces for political representation.

Notas

¹ Peña Nieto, then governor of the state of Mexico, is responsible for the state police's excessive use of force in San Salvador Atenco in 2006 during a protest of the government's decision to block the activities of local flower vendors. Peña Nieto sent in three thousand police officers to crack down on three hundred protesters. The clash resulted in the deaths of two protesters, injury and detention of hundreds more, and the sexual assault of many. ("Informe preliminar sobre los hechos de Atenco" 2006)

² Indeed, several students and supporters reported harassment after uploading the video to YouTube. José Morales Orozco, rector of the Ibero, published an open letter denouncing hostilities (Morales Orozco 2012).

³ Televisa successfully defended itself against claims of accepting money in exchange for favourable airtime through an IFE process. The allegations, however, caused considerable controversy in the weeks leading up to the elections and were a major part of #YoSoy132' platform, according to a joint statement published on February 5, 2013 on *The Guardian's* website.

⁴ Hernández Rivera enumerates the significance of this first "Fiesta de la Luz", for being 1) an unprecedented event in the nation's history; 2) for clearly pointing out the principal actors responsible for impeding true democracy; 3) for the symbolic gesture of taking possession of something that should be in the hands of citizens; 4) for the possibility of challenging the business with an ethical and critical counterproposal; and 5) for choosing a strategic space to articulate its demands (Rivera Hernández "Carnavalización De La Protesta Y Cine Político: Artistas Aliados Y El Frente Autónomo Audiovisual #Yosoy132" 176).

⁵ "La validación sin ninguna crítica a un proceso plagado de irregularidades terminó por convencer a #YoSoy132 de que la vía electoral estaba clausurada para el pueblo por los poderes fácticos y las instancias electorales cómplices."

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